DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 616 SO 017 727

AUTHOR Nelson, Jack L.
TITLE Academic Freedom in Social Education: An Australian Perspective.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Freedom; *Educational Environment; Foreign Countries; *Intellectual Freedom; Personal Autonomy; Political Attitudes; Politics of Education; *Professional Autonomy; Secondary Education; *Social Sciences; Teaching Conditions
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

Academic freedom for precollegiate teachers in the United States is less clear than that expressed and confirmed in law and custom for college faculties. The question studied was how academic freedom is perceived in theory and practice by secondary school teachers outside of the United States. The interview schedule was modeled after schedules used in interview studies in secondary schools in New Jersey, California, and Cambridge, England. This study involved nine social studies teachers in a suburban secondary school near Perth, Australia. The responses found that Australian and United States teachers were essentially similar in their views of academic decision-making, their own academic freedom, and the kinds of restrictions on topics. United States respondents consistently identified other teachers as more conservative than themselves, regardless of their self-identification on a spectrum. The Australian respondents, however, identified other teachers as having more liberal political views than their own. There was a general feeling among Australian respondents that academic freedom for teachers was not an issue. United States interviewees in previous studies were much more sensitive to local politics, parent groups, and incidents where academic freedom had been compromised by administrators or boards. Interviewees were also questioned concerning the length of their teaching experience, subjects of preparation, and current teaching subject. (BZ)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED275616

Academic Freedom in Social Education: an Australian Perspective

Jack L. Nelson
Graduate School of Education
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ 08903

April 1986

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jack L. Nelson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SP017727

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Academic Freedom in Social Education: an Australian Perspective

Presentation at AERA, San Francisco, April, 1986

Jack L. Nelson
Graduate School of Education
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ 08903

Academic freedom has been a subject of considerable interest by scholars, advocates, and others over a period of time. This literature has included rationales, historical studies, legal cases and examples (Dewey, 1936; Hutchins, 1954; Kirk, 1955; Hofstadter and Metzger, 1955; Joughin, 1969). Much of that literature has concentrated on higher education, but there is a sizable literature regarding academic freedom and its problems in precollegiate institutions (Sinclair, 1924; Pierce, 1926,1933; Beale, 1936, 1941; Gellerman, 1938; American Civil Liberties Union, 1971; Clark, 1975; Nelson and Hering 1976; O'Neil, 1981)

There is much dispute about what constitutes academic freedom, especially for classroom teachers below the college level. For college faculty there is a much more elaborate body of literature which attempts to describe, define, and argue for one or more forms. In the United States, the major disputes have involved the location in which the exercise of academic freedom can occur, the relation of academic freedom to tenure, the extent to which academic freedom protects any behaviors, and the due process requirements inherent in protecting teacher rights.

Academic freedom, in higher education in the U.S., has traditionally encompassed freedom for teacher and for student.

For teachers, as the 1915 Declaration of Principles of the American Association of University Professors declares, academic freedom has incorporated "three elements: freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and freedom of extra-mural utterance and action." (Joughin, 1969) This was elaborated in the standard 1940 AAUP Statement of Principles.(Joughin, 1969). Under the umbrella of academic freedom have come such items as faculty determination of curriculum, teaching materials, topics of study, and involvement in public issues. Academic tradition, and legal decisions, have provided a basis for claims of academic freedom for college faculties.

Academic freedom for precollegiate teachers in America is less clear than that expressed and confirmed in law and custom for college faculties. The issues of impressionability of younger age students and the compulsory nature of precollegiate schooling are two of the main factors which complicate the matter. There is also a societal and historical setting in the United States in which precollegiate teachers are perceived more as public servants than as intellectuals and are presumed to model a level of moral character in conformity with an idealized concept of social norms. Studies of academic freedom and censorship in elementary and secondary schools have provided depressing evidence of the problem.(Sinclair,1924; Pierce,1926, 1933; Beale,1936, 1941; Raup, 1936; Nelson, 1963; Palonsky and Nelson, 1980; Nelson and Stanley, 1985).

These factors, presumed impressionability of youth, compulsory education, and the relatively lower intellectual status of precollegiate teachers, create a community sense that precollege teachers ought to have some restrictions on academic freedom. This is documented by the state laws which impose school board intervention in curriculum and teaching material decisions, administrator review of teaching, and similar structures to limit the autonomy of teachers in instructional decisions. It is also documented by the mixed legal case history of court decisions on the nature, extent, and type of academic freedom permitted precollege teachers (O'Neil, 1981). Further, studies conducted on college students who had completed student teaching in typical public schools (Palonsky and Nelson,1980), and case studies of precollege teachers in schools districts in New Jersey and California (Nelson, 1977), demonstrate a confusion about academic freedom and teacher decision-making on instructional matters. A recent ethnographic analysis of a year as a precollege teacher confirms with detail and numerous examples this confusion and resulting teacher withdrawal (Palonsky, 1986). This confusion leads easily to teacher accommodation to restrictions by claiming academic freedom in theory, but practicing self-censorship (Nelson, 1983).

Research Question

Among the many questions raised by this topic is whether or not it is similar to the situation in other nations. This study is an analysis of data from a very limited opportunity to conduct

a case study in a secondary school in a suburban area near Perth, Australia. The research question was what do social studies teachers in this school perceive as academic freedom in theory and practice.

Data Source and Methodology

Data come from structured individual interviews of the entire social studies teaching faculty (n=9), in 1985. The interview schedule was modeled after schedules used in interview studies in secondary schools in New Jersey, California, and Cambridge England. Appointments for individual interviews were arranged with the assistance of the school administrators and the social studies department head. The interviews were private, and respondents were given assurance of confidentiality. The Australian school was identified by knowledgeable informants as one of the better academic secondary schools with a high quality social studies faculty, and comparable in these terms with the kinds of schools previously studied in the U.S.

Limitations

As a case study of a small group of faculty in a single school, there can be no research generalizations to a larger population. Interview data rely upon the presumption of honest answers by respondents.

Respondent Data (n=9)

Respondents included 6 male and 3 female teachers. Table 1 shows years of teaching experience, and years at this school.

TABLE 1
Teaching Experience of Respondents

	Total years experience					Years at school*						
	1	2,3	4-7	8-10	20+	1	2	3	4-6	7	8	9
Male	0	0	3	2	1	1	2	1	0	1	0	1
Female	0	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0

*In Western Australia teachers are required to move among schools, including the requirement of teaching service in both city and country schools. It should also be noted that this school is only nine years old.

As Table 1 indicates, there is a high proportion of males to females in the social studies staff of the school, and the females are the most recent members. The school has been established only nine years, but only two of the faculty have been there for more than three years. This is the product of a staffing approach to Western Australian schools, and would be similar to other schools in this state.

Australia provides its five states with very great latitude in organizing and operating schools. Western Australia, one of the largest states, includes the capital city of Perth and its surrounding metropolitan area as well as large expanses of country lands which are rural with very low population density. The school staffing structure in Western Australia requires that teachers agree to teach a proportion of their careers in city schools and also in country schools. This provides many advan-

tages in variety of experience for teachers, in staffing schools that might otherwise be difficult, and for reinvigorating staffs as a result of continous rotation. The main disadvantages, as identified by the school administrator in interviews (August, 1985), are the constant need to prepare new staff for the school and the lack of a core of long term, stable faculty. The main disadvantage identified by faculty members involves the requirement to move and its tangent problems of short term planning and commitment. Discussions with school staff, the school head, officers of the state education authority, and faculty at Western Australian Institute of Technology indicate general agreement that the staffing structure advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

The social studies teaching staff was prepared mainly at higher education institutions in Western Australia, with only one member (male, with several years teaching experience) prepared outside the state, at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Five teachers, the four youngest in experience and one of the oldest in experience, were prepared at the University of Western Australia; two received preparation at the Western Australian Institute of Technology; the remaining two teachers were prepared at the Western Australian College of Advanced Education and its separate campuses (Claremont and Nedlands). The social studies staff represents several subjects of preparation and the school spectrum of social studies curriculum. Table 2 identifies those subjects.

TABLE 2

Respondents' Subjects of Preparation and Teaching

		Courses Currently Teaching					
Preparation	Number*	S.S.	His	Pol	Geo	An	Ec
Social Studies	2 (2)	2(2)	(1)				
History	1 (1)	(1)	1				
Politics	(1)	(1)					
Geography	1 (3)	(1)	(1)	(1)	1(3)		
Anthropology	2	1					1
Economics	1 (1)	(1)				1	
Others	2	2					

* 1= major subject studied; (1)= minor subject studied

Table 2 shows that most social studies faculty were teaching in subjects in which they had undertaken major or minor study. It also shows that the teaching curriculum includes general social studies courses as well as several social sciences. There is some apparent emphasis on geography.

Respondent Self-Identified Political Positions

Respondents were asked to identify their own general political view on a spectrum from right wing to left wing, and then to identify their perception of the political views of most other teachers in the school. Table 3 shows these responses.

TABLE 3

Respondent Perceptions of Political Views

Self	Other Teachers: Right	Midright	Mid	Midleft	Left	TOTAL
Right Wing		1		1	1	3
Middle Right		1	1	1		3
Middle						
Middle Left	1	1				2
Left Wing						
Far Left			1			1
TOTAL	1	3	2	2	1	

As Table 3 indicates, the majority of respondents perceive themselves as middle right or right wing in politics, and perceive other teachers as more to the left than themselves. The three more leftward teachers perceive the other teachers more to the right of themselves. Only one respondent (middle right) perceived that other teachers were of similar political views.

Findings Regarding Instructional Decision-making

Interviews with the social studies faculty on the topics of teacher freedom, decision-making on instruction, and perceptions of controversial issues produced findings of interest. These responses have been organized into categories to permit convenience of reportage. Sample illustrative responses will be reported in quotation marks.

Curricular Decision-making:

The interview schedule included a series of questions on the current practices of deciding on curriculum and teaching materials, and sought respondent perceptions of what ought to be the nature of such academic decision-making. In regard to current curricular decisions, all respondents identified the set syllabus from the State Education Department. That syllabus is set by a Joint Syllabus Committee (tertiary and public schools) of 16 to 20 educational staff, with teacher representatives selected by the Superintendent; a subcommittee is the examining panel to construct the external exam. Initiation for curricular change may come from within the schools or from the Department of Education; the syllabus is reviewed within five years. The required program, K-10, is the entire curriculum.

Respondents generally considered the process satisfactory; some expressed strong support for the process and the product; a few had minor qualifications.

"It is pretty fair."

"I see no need for change."

"It is difficult to deviate from the guide."

"There is an emphasis on teaching towards the exams."

"There is too much stress on tertiary admissions."

Teaching Material Decision-making

In regard to the selection of teaching materials, respondents identified the process in somewhat different terms. Most described the Resource Kit available from the Education Depart-

ment, and the Teacher Guidelines supplied by the Department. Some indicated that teachers can request approval from the school Senior Master for materials. A few stated that they could bring anything in. And one noted that he prepared most of his own materials, and did not utilize much from the Resource Kit. Comments on the level of teacher freedom in selecting materials ranged from complete latitude to cautious selectivity.

"There is 100% latitude... teacher decides."

"The behavioral objectives in the Guide are to be avoided, and the teacher can do that."

"I can bring in any materials provided I didn't bring in anything that was contentious on moral, political grounds - or anything offensive...can't bring in extreme materials..must be middle road material. It is not my job to drive a wedge between the student and a home background."

"Keeping the values of the Education Department in mind, I would judge the suitability for age, and so on. Radical Economics is not much in the Guide."

Comments on the process of selection of teaching materials were generally supportive; all but two respondents stated that the teacher's ability to obtain state-supplied materials or to secure Senior Master approval to obtain teaching materials was satisfactory. Most respondents noted that the Resource Guides are extensive, and that they can bring in other materials.

Findings Related to Controversial Subjects

Respondents were asked to identify topics they considered

too controversial for class discussion, and to provide comments on this aspect of their teaching. Five of the nine respondents (4 male and 1 female) stated that no subject was too controversial for examination in social studies, and one (male) stated that no subject was too controversial providing it was "dealt with in general and not in specifics." The remaining four respondents identified the topics of "sexual morality" (2; one female and one male), and "personal opinions on politics and alternative economic systems" (1;female) as too controversial for social studies.

Following probe questions on controversial topics, most respondents identified specific areas or approaches that they felt should be restricted. Illustrative comments follow:

"Don't teach values is something I've always been taught."

"Biggest problem is racism; not too controversial, but a bad attitude area-aborigines, and the rest [non-aborigines] attitudes toward Asians - it's not covered much in social studies."

"Personally, I would avoid those (fundamentalist religions) ideas. I don't think it is valuable educationally."

"So long as both sides are presented. You need to be careful. You keep on a fairly narrow path."

"I'd probably avoid [discussion of] sex aids and homosexuality because of a general lack of knowledge."

"Peace education..the Education Department's view is that they could not come into school to distribute material."

One respondent replied to each probe that there were no

qualifications on controversial topics. In one form or another, the remaining respondents qualified their general reply to topics considered too controversial.

Findings on Perceptions of Academic Freedom

Respondents were given the opportunity to define academic freedom for teachers and students. There was general agreement on a definition that included the ability to choose topics to teach, that some restrictions occur, and that academic freedom exists in the school for teachers, though not as clearly nor extensively for students. Example comments:

"You can teach whatever topics you want to."

"In Victoria there is no syllabus, no guidelines; it's a shambles."

"Ability to discuss any topic in class without external influences."

"Being able to teach what you want, within bounds of what's allowed."

"Enabling students to be free from curriculum to develop self-interests; similar for teacher."

"Academic freedom for students must be curtailed if they are to progress in a particular discipline."

"Pretty free at the moment...students, a fair bit, but not too much. They are not yet mature; some high ability it's OK."

DISCUSSION

This case study of a secondary school in a suburb of Perth, Western Australia involved interviews of the social studies

teaching staff. The primary purpose of the study was to examine teacher perceptions of academic freedom, and to compare them with studies of American schools conducted previously. Essentially, the responses of Australian teachers interviewed were similar to responses of American teachers (Nelson,1977) in their views of academic decision-making, their own academic freedom, and the kinds of restrictions on topics. Australian respondents identified the political views of themselves and other teachers in a manner which differed from responses found among American respondents who had just completed student teaching in local schools. (Palonsky and Nelson,1980) American respondents consistently identified other teachers as more right (conservative) than themselves, regardless of their self-identification on a spectrum. The Australian respondents, however, identified other teachers as having different political views from their own, but the differences were on the opposite side of the spectrum, not consistently right of the respondent.

Academic decision-making in both the Australian case and in American studies was generally considered satisfactory, including the use of approved teaching materials and the following of a prescribed curriculum guide.

In regard to controversial topics, Australian and American respondents initially identified no topic as too controversial, but usually qualified this comment substantially on probe questions relating to specific topics. Sex, racism, religion, economics and peace education were identified as areas where the

teachers would restrict discussion. The rationales proposed for restricting discussion were similar to the categories identified in studies of American teachers: professional, personal, and political. Respondent Australian views of academic freedom for teachers and students were relatively consistent with those found in American studies: teachers have complete academic freedom; students have it under certain circumstances. These views coincide with the comments on controversial topics; complete academic freedom somehow includes teacher responsiveness to political, personal, and professional bases for restricting knowledge. There appeared to be less concern about parental views of controversy in Australian responses than in American.

Career patterns of teachers in Western Australia differ from those in typical American schools in that the Australian teachers are not expected to remain in one school for the majority of their careers. Thus, each school will have a group of new teachers each year. While this happens in American schools, it is not the result of educational planning; it varies by individual school and teacher. Except for new schools, the typical American school will have a relatively high proportion of teachers who have spent several years at that school. In the Australian case, only two of the nine have spent more than three years at that school. There appeared to be no differences among types of responses of Australian teachers which were accounted for by length of teaching experience, or nature of preparation. For the purposes of this paper, those differences between the

Australian school and American schools studied previously does not appear to be important to the kinds of responses obtained.

From the limited evidence available, Australian respondents claim freedom to teach, but engage in forms of self-censorship, similar to their American counterparts. Australian interviewees, however, were much less conscious of local parental pressures or of specific censorious incidents which create a climate that would restrict their exercise of teacher freedoms. In these terms, Australian respondents seemed less likely than American ones to self-impose teaching restrictions because of political reasons, but easily provided professional or personal reasons. There was a general feeling among Australian respondents that academic freedom for teachers was not an issue; American interviewees in previous studies were much more sensitive to local politics, parent groups, and incidents where teacher freedoms had been compromised by administrators or boards.

More thorough study of this topic would be of benefit. The limitations of interview studies in individual schools are acknowledged; larger scale and different design studies could expand knowledge of precollegiate teacher academic freedom. In addition to more comprehensive studies of teacher perceptions, there is a need for scholarly work in such areas as: the dynamics of school academic freedom settings; teacher education programs; student academic freedom; and community politics.

REFERENCES

American Civil Liberties Union. Academic Freedom in the Secondary School. NY: ACLU. 1971.

Beale, Howard K. Are American Teachers Free? NY: Chas. Scribner's Sons. 1936.

Beale, Howard K. A History of Freedom in Teaching. NY: Chas. Scribner's Sons. 1941.

Clark, Todd. ed., "The Question of Academic Freedom" Social Education . 39 (1975). 195-252.

Dewey, John. "The Social Significance of Academic Freedom", Social Frontier. 2 (March 1936) 165-6.

Gellerman, William. The American Legion as Educators. NY: Teachers College Press. 1938.

Hofstadter, Richard and Walter Metzger. The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States. NY: Columbia University Press. 1955.

Hutchins, Robert. The University of Utopia. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1953.

Joughin, Louis. Academic Freedom and Tenure. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press. 1969.

Kirk, Russell. Academic Freedom. Chicago: Regnery. 1955.

Nelson, Jack L. "Perceptions of Censorship and Controversy:- Censorship Policy in a School District". Unpublished Paper. American Educational Research Association Conference, Nov., 1977.

Nelson, Jack L. "Academic Freedom and Teacher Self-Censorship", The Social Studies Professional (Sept., 1983).

Nelson, Jack L. and William Hering. Developing a Position on Academic Freedom and Censorship. Boulder CO: Social Science Education Consortium. 1976.

Nelson, Jack L. and William Stanley. "Academic Freedom: 50 Years Standing Still", Social Education. 49 (Nov, 1985) 662-666.

O'Neil, Robert M. Classrooms in the Crossfire. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press. 1981.

Palonsky, Stuart. 900 Shows. NY: Random House. 1986.

Palonsky, Stuart and Jack Nelson. "Political Restraint in the Socialization of Student Teachers" Theory and Research in Social Education. 7 (Winter, 1980) 19-34.

Pierce, Bessie. Public Opinion and the Teaching of History in the United States. NY: Knopf. 1926.

Pierce, Bessie. Citizens' Organizations and the Civic Training of Youth NY: Chas. Scribner's Sons, 1933.

Raup, Bruce. Education and Organized Interests in America. NY: G.P. Putnam. 1936

Sinclair, Upton. The Goslings. Pasadena CA: self-published. 1924.